
12. Youth Engagement in the IGAD Region: Good Practices and Lessons Learned in Countering Radicalization into Violent Extremism through Strategic Communication

Martha Njiiri and Simon Nyambura

Abstract

Africa has the world's largest youth demographic, with approximately 70% of the population in countries south of the Sahara aged below 30. About 55% of IGAD region total population are in the youth bracket with the median age ranging from 16-19 years. Consequently, the youth constitute a significant vulnerable population; research studies denote increased radicalisation and recruitment of youth into violent extremist groups in the IGAD region. Coverage of the youth largely portrays them as supporters and perpetrators of violent extremism yet they also find themselves as victims suffering the consequences. The allure offered by violent extremist groups ought to make governments and policy makers reconsider the role of youth in efforts towards preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). There is need for IGAD Member States to have mechanisms in place to actively engage the youth as preventers not only part in meeting the commitments in implementation of the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda but also in recognition of their vantage point in understanding their peers' grievances and positively influencing them. It is on this premise that the IGAD Regional Strategy for P/CVE outlines youth engagement as a key measure to strengthen their capacity to reject the ideologies and aims of violent extremists'. A key component of this approach is the use of strategic communication that incorporates dialogue-based methods to address grievances, counter violent extremists' narratives, and support community level conflict resolution. This paper examines the role that IGAD Centre of

Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (ICEPCVE) in strengthening youth capacities in strategic communication and dialogue to prevent and counter violent extremism in their communities while highlighting the gaps and opportunities that IGAD Member States need to enhance meaningful youth engagement in P/CVE initiatives.

Keywords: Youth, Radicalization, Violent Extremism, P/CVE, Strategic Communication, Dialogue, Conflict Resolution

Abbreviations

ICEPCVE- IGAD Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

IGAD- Intergovernmental Authority on Development

PCVE or P/CVE- Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

UN WPP- United Nations World Population Prospects

UNFPA- United Nations Population Fund

VE- Violent Extremism

YALI- Young African Leaders Initiative

YPS- Youth, Peace and Security

Operational Definition of Key Terms

Centre: In this study, “the Centre” refers to the IGAD Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (ICEPCVE), the regional body mandated to coordinate P/CVE efforts and youth engagement initiatives across IGAD Member States.

Counter- and alternative narratives: refer to complementary strategic communication approaches used in P/CVE to reduce the appeal of violent extremism.

Counter-narratives directly challenge and discredit extremist ideologies, misinformation, and recruitment messages by exposing their falsehoods, contradictions, and associated harms. **Alternative**

narratives, on the other hand, present positive, community-driven stories and values that promote peace, inclusion, resilience, and constructive pathways for youth and communities.

Dialogue: refers to a structured, inclusive, and facilitated communication process that brings together individuals or groups to share perspectives, address grievances, build mutual understanding, and collaboratively identify solutions. In ICEPCVE's approach, dialogue is used as a preventive and trust-building mechanism—interreligious, intercultural, or intergenerational—to reduce tensions, counter extremist narratives, and strengthen community resilience.

Strategic Communication: the deliberate and context-sensitive process of designing and disseminating gender-responsive and conflict-sensitive messages—combined with structured dialogue—to counter violent extremist narratives, promote positive alternatives, and strengthen community resilience through coordinated, participatory, and multimedia communication approaches.

Violent Extremism: According to the IGAD Regional Strategy for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, it refers to the beliefs and actions of individuals or groups who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious, political, social, or economic goals, and encompasses terrorism as well as other forms of politically inspired, sectarian, or communal violence. It is understood both as an ideology anchored on violence and as a phenomenon that rejects peaceful means—such as dialogue—in favour of coercion, fear, and intimidation

Youth Engagement: active and meaningful involvement of young people in designing, implementing, and leading P/CVE initiatives, where they contribute their skills, perspectives, and influence to strengthen community resilience and counter violent extremism.

1. Violent Extremism in the IGAD Region

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) is a regional economic community in Eastern Africa comprising of eight member states including Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda. Eastern Africa ranks high among the most affected by the violent

extremism threat as a quickly evolving transnational security threat. To a great extent, violent extremism in the region manifests as a complex hybrid of civil wars, insurgencies, separatisms, terrorism, political violence and criminality deeply rooted in internal and external conflicts that that the region has experienced in recent decades (IGAD, 2018). This is compounded by natural disasters (drought, famine and food insecurity due to climate change), widespread poverty, underdevelopment and unemployment, especially affecting a rapidly growing youth stratum.

The violent extremism threat coupled by political, socio-economic and geopolitical challenges continues to undermine IGAD efforts to fulfill its mandate to promote peace and stability in the region. Preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) in Eastern Africa as elsewhere calls for concerted efforts at all levels- local, national, regional and international. In 2018, IGAD with support of development partners, foresaw the development of a comprehensive regional strategy for P/CVE in 2018 to provide the necessary framework to guide the generation and implementation of effective policy and action avert and neutralize violent ideologies. Subsequently, the IGAD Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent extremism (ICEPCVE) was inaugurated to provide guidance and coordination to ensure the effectiveness of the activities and programmes proposed by the strategy. Designed as a regional platform, ICEPCVE also facilitates the sharing of good practices, lessons learned, and experiences among Member States, thereby strengthening collective efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism across the IGAD region.

Since formation, ICEPCVE has been on fore to promote P/CVE in the IGAD member states from over-reliance on 'hard' security measures to 'soft' or non-coercive efforts to undermine the strategies and tactics of violent extremists including having national strategies for P/CVE, designing alternative narratives and enhancing capacities to enable at-risk communities to resist radicalization to violence as well as addressing specific grievances that militants exploit to radicalize and recruit into their groups. The P/CVE approach has placed communities who were previously minimally involved including civil society, women, youth and faith based groups at the center of the fight against all forms of violent extremism.

2. Youth in the IGAD Region

Africa records the highest number of youthful population in the world, with approximately 70% of the population in the region south of the Sahara under the age of 30. About 55% of IGAD region total population are in the youth bracket with the median age ranging from 16-19 years (IGAD, 2023). According to (Yeboua & Cilliers, 2023) the Horn of Africa has an exceptionally young population with the countries recording an average age of 17; the median age of youth in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan and South Sudan is 18, that of Kenya is 19 and the median age of Somalia which is the epicentre of violent extremism in the Horn is 15. Though Djibouti has a median age of 25 yet it represents over half of the population (See Table 1). In absolute numbers, this translates to about 156 million youth aged 15-35 years out of a regional population of 283 million in 2022 (IGAD, 2023); (IGAD, 2025), underscoring the demographic significance of this group.

Table1: Overview of Youth Age Demographics in the IGAD Region

IGAD Member State	Median Age (years)	% under 30	% aged 15–35
Djibouti	25	64.5	55
Eritrea	18	67.5	56
Ethiopia	18	70	56.5
Kenya	19	65	55
Somalia	15	75.6	60
South Sudan	18	74	58
Sudan	18	70	56
Uganda	19	73	57

Source: UN WPP 2024, UNFPA 2024, IGAD Facts & Figures 2023

The youth bulge in the IGAD region as in the African continent coupled with the high rate of unemployment along with other socio-economic challenges continues to exacerbate their vulnerability

and susceptibility to be radicalized and recruited into violent extremism; additionally, grievances related to lack of access to education, weak service delivery, corruption, poor governance and human rights abuses compound these risks. From the demographic statistics, the youth in the IGAD region constitute a large percentage of the population at risk to violent extremism, both as victims and perpetrators; research studies denote increased radicalisation and recruitment of youth into violent extremist groups in the IGAD region (Mukuna, 2019).

Programmatically, this demographic profile of youth in the IGAD region reinforces the urgency of integrated approaches including actively empowering and engaging young men and women as peacebuilders. The IGAD Youth Policy (2023) equally underscores the importance of harnessing this demographic potential by promoting youth as agents of peace and security, rather than viewing them just as vulnerable populations. The Centre/ICEPCVE has been on the fore to ensure youth are active P/CVE champions through provision of frameworks for cross border youth engagement as well as enhancing their capacity in P/CVE advocacy and in challenging violent extremists' ideologies by designing and disseminating effective alternative and counter narratives as well as amplifying the existing narratives reject the extremists' ideologies.

3. Research Objectives

1. To evaluate IGAD's institutional frameworks for youth engagement in P/CVE
2. To examine the role of strategic communication in empowering youth to counter violent extremism in the IGAD region
3. To explore the contribution of dialogue as a communication and conflict-prevention mechanism among the youth in the IGAD region
4. To identify gaps and opportunities for strengthening youth-focused P/CVE interventions in the IGAD region

4. Research Questions

1. How do existing IGAD policies and programmatic documents position youth within P/CVE efforts?
2. What role does strategic communication play in empowering youth to counter violent extremist narratives and foster community resilience in the IGAD region?
3. How does dialogue contribute to conflict prevention, grievance management, and trust-building among youth in the IGAD region?
4. What gaps exist in current youth engagement and communication approaches, and what opportunities can IGAD Member States leverage to enhance youth-led P/CVE initiatives?

5. Theoretical Framework

Efforts to understand youth vulnerability to radicalisation and the effectiveness of youth engagement in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) are informed by several interrelated theoretical perspectives. This paper is guided by two complementary theories, the Youth Bulge Theory and the positive Youth Development (PYD) Paradigm, to conceptualize both the structural drivers of youth radicalisation and the potential of young people as agents of peace.

6. The Youth Bulge Theory

The theory owes its origins to political demography and conflict studies where researchers noted association between large youthful populations and heightened risks of political instability and violence. According to Heinshohn (2003), societies with disproportionately large youth populations face increased stability when the economic, political, and social systems cannot accommodate young people aspirations. Further empirical studies on this theory reveal that youth bulges significantly increase the likelihood of armed conflict when coupled with structural pressures such as unemployment, poor governance, and rapid urbanization. However, youth bulges are not inherently destabilizing; rather,

their effects depend on contextual factors including state capacity, access to education, and economic opportunity (Urdal, 2006).

In the IGAD region, the youthful population is pronounced, with more than half of the population being under the age of 30 and the median ages ranging from 16-19 years. Such demographic pressure is highly likely to increase the potential for social unrest when young people experience marginalization, in contexts where grievances accumulate and governance is weak, violent extremist groups may exploit youth frustration and offer identity, belonging, or economic incentives that make radicalization more appealing.

In that light, the Youth Bulge Theory provides a critical lens for understanding the structural drivers of insecurity and the vulnerability of youth to violent extremism. It underscores the importance of youth-centered interventions including employment creation, strategic communication and dialogue-based conflict resolution to harness demographic dividend and mitigate security risks.

7. Positive Youth Development (PYD) Paradigm

The Positive Youth Development (PYD) paradigm emerged in 1990s as a shift away from deficit-based models that modeled young people primarily as risks to be managed; instead PYD emphasized on their strengths, assets, and development potential arguing that if provided with supportive environments, then they are more likely to thrive and contribute positively to the society. According to Lerner et al (2005), PYD is grounded in ecological systems theory positing that youth outcomes are greatly shaped by interconnected environments including families, schools, communities, and political structures. As such, positive outcomes emerge when youth are given meaningful opportunities for participation, leadership, mentorship and skill-building.

In P/CVE context, the PYD paradigm provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how strengthening youth agency, resilience, and engagement can reduce vulnerability to violent extremism. By shifting the analytical lens from risk factors to developmental assets, PYD supports interventions that empower youth through constructive dialogue, strategic communication, and

participation in community problem-solving. This approach aligns closely with contemporary P/CVE strategies that position young people not merely as beneficiaries of prevention efforts, but as active partners and leaders in fostering social cohesion and preventing violence. It also reflects IGAD's broader emphasis on youth as agents of change that are central contributors to resilience, dialogue, and conflict transformation across the region.

8. Methodology

A qualitative research design was adopted to enable an in-depth exploration of policies, institutional strategies, and demographic data relevant to youth engagement and P/CVE in the IGAD region. Within this design, the study relied on documentary analysis, which is appropriate for policy-oriented research and facilitates systematic review, comparison, and interpretation of key institutional texts.

Documentary analysis provided an effective means of synthesising the content of IGAD's strategic documents, demographic datasets, and youth engagement frameworks to generate insights on the opportunities, challenges, and emerging trends in youth-focused P/CVE efforts.

The study drew from a robust range of primary IGAD documents, regional reports, global demographic datasets, and scholarly literature. A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify documents based on their relevance (texts explicitly discussing youth engagement, P/CVE, strategic communication, or dialogue), authoritativeness (documents produced by IGAD, ICEPCVE, UN agencies, ISS Africa, or recognised research bodies) and currency (materials published between 2016 and 2024, reflecting contemporary P/CVE frameworks and recent youth demographic trend).

9. Youth Engagement as a Key Pillar in ICEPCVE's Strategic Documents

The IGAD Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (ICEPCVE) has in place key strategic documents including the IGAD Regional Strategy for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE), the Programming Document, the Youth Engagement Strategy and the Strategic

Communication Manual, all of which position youth engagement as key pillar in efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism at both regional and national levels.

10. The IGAD Regional P/CVE Strategy

The IGAD Regional Strategy for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) recognizes the pivotal role that youth can play as champions in discrediting violent extremists' ideologies as they have a vantage point in understanding their peers' grievances and positively influencing them and therefore, youth engagement is outlined as a key measure to strengthen their capacity to reject the ideologies and aims of violent extremists. The Strategy acknowledges that the youth constitute a demographic that is most targeted by violent extremist groups and constitute a powerful mass capable of driving sustainable prevention efforts in the community: this dual recognition positions the youth not only as passive beneficiaries of P/CVE interventions but as active agents in shaping regional peace and security.

The Strategy as such emphasizes the centrality of youth in designing and disseminating credible counter and alternative narratives. Messages crafted by young men and women are viewed particularly persuasive and impressionable within youth networks, making them key contributors to prevention efforts. Since inception, the Centre has provided platforms through regional and national convenings to not only to enhance their capacity in effective messaging but to also give them a space to voice their grievances, reflect collectively on their experiences and explore constructive pathways for navigating the challenges that make them vulnerable to radicalization. Through these strategic engagements, youth are empowered to transform their insights into proactive contributions toward peace, resilience and community-level conflict prevention.

The Strategy additionally promotes the establishment of youth dialogue platforms to facilitate critical discussion on violent extremism, as well as the use of sports, cultural activities, and faith based youth initiatives as accessible entry points for outreach. These avenues are not only important for efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism, but also central to contemporary conflict resolution

which emphasize dialogue, relationship-building and inclusive participation as foundations for sustainable peace.

11. The Programme Document

The ICEPCVE Five-Year Programme Document is anchored in the need to strengthen and operationalize regional P/CVE efforts as espoused in the IGAD P/CVE Strategy while ensuring that young people who represent both the most vulnerable population to violent extremists' manipulation and the most powerful agents of prevention are meaningfully engaged in P/CVE efforts. As such, it outlines youth as a critical and core target audience, prioritizing interventions that address youth specific drivers of radicalization including unemployment, alienation, limited civic participation, lack of psychosocial support and exposure to online recruitment while strengthening youth-led and youth-informed prevention strategies. The Programme Document therefore positions youth engagement as a foundational pillar of regional resilience building recognizing that empowering the youth to design, implement and lead P/CVE initiatives contributes directly to broader peacebuilding and conflict resolution by fostering intercultural and interreligious dialogue, promoting social cohesion and enabling the youth to address community grievances through non-violent approaches.

By prioritizing the development of a Strategic Communication Manual so as to contribute effectively to strengthening the communication capacities of civil society and youth networks, the programme recognizes young people as critical conveyors of credible alternative and counter-narratives, messages that resonate strongly among peers and can interrupt pathways to violent extremism. The capacity-building activities and regional learning workshops outlined in the programme intentionally place youth at the centre of narrative development, equipping them with the tools to identify early signs of radicalization, promote social cohesion, and challenge the grievances exploited by extremist groups. These communication processes also serve broader conflict resolution objectives: they create platforms for inclusive dialogue, empower youth to articulate community-based concerns, and promote narratives that reduce tensions, address misperceptions, and build trust between communities and

institutions. In this way, strategic communication becomes both a youth empowerment mechanism and a preventive diplomacy tool, supporting young people in mediating tensions, bridging societal divides, and contributing constructively to peacebuilding in the IGAD region.

12. The Strategic Communication Manual

Flagged as a core activity under the Programme Document, the Strategic Communication Manual was developed to serve as a tool guiding activities that focus on enhancing capacity of target audiences in counter and alternative messaging. The manual emphasizes on the crucial role that youth play in dissemination counter and alternative narratives and fostering community resilience, it explicitly identifies youth among the key actors who must be trained to “take messages that counter the violent extremism narratives into the communities” highlighting that young people are not only highly targeted by extremist recruitment but also uniquely positioned to challenge and disrupt extremist messaging within their peer networks. The manual outlines how extremist groups continue to exploit media particularly through online and offline platforms to disseminate persuasive propaganda, a challenge that youth in the IGAD region must be equipped to counter through informed and evidence based messaging.

The manual also explicitly connects communication practices to conflict resolution, particularly throughout its dedicated section on “Dialogue for Peaceful Co-existence” where it distinguishes between environments where dialogue is absent and those where dialogue supports powerful relations, providing checklists and good practice guidelines that reinforce how communication can repair trust, reduce tensions and prevent escalation. Through structured dialogue, communities including youth are able to gain tools to address grievances, articulate concerns, and navigate identity-based tensions in non-violent ways which aligns with preventive diplomacy principles by prioritizing communication as a mechanism for resolving disputes before they manifest into violent conflict.

By training youth to understand extremist media tactics, select audiences strategically, and disseminate persuasive alternative and counter-messages grounded in dialogue and coexistence, the manual positions young people as essential peace actors. They are empowered not only to challenge extremist propaganda but also to mediate tensions, build trust, and strengthen social cohesion which makes youth-led communication a practical tool for both countering violent extremism and broader conflict resolution efforts across the IGAD region.

13. The IGAD Youth Engagement Strategy in P/CVE

The IGAD Youth Engagement Strategy in P/CVE (2021-2026) was developed and validated to guide the youth in the IGAD region on how to effectively undertake activities to counter violent extremism in their communities following a gap identified in global and regional strategies which lacked a country-specific and youth-centered guide for meaningful engagement. As such, the Engagement Strategy seeks to equip youth with the skills, networks, and institutional linkages needed to meaningfully participate in national and regional P/CVE processes, enabling them to contribute not only as individuals but also collectively through organized groups and cross-border networks. It aims to harness young people's agency, resilience, and lived experiences in confronting the drivers of violent extremism while promoting their inclusion in institutional structures and policy processes.

In addition to reducing vulnerability to extremist recruitment, the Strategy advances broader conflict resolution objectives by fostering dialogue, strengthening social cohesion, and empowering young people to engage constructively in addressing community grievances which present as core elements of preventive diplomacy and conflict transformation. By positioning youth as agents of change with the capacity to mediate tensions, generate alternative narratives, and promote inclusive decision-making, the Strategy effectively bridges P/CVE efforts with peacebuilding processes. Ultimately, it seeks to ensure that youth voices, capacities, and leadership are integrated not only into prevention and disengagement initiatives but also into community-level conflict resolution and resilience-building across IGAD Member States.

14. Youth Engagement in Strategic Communication Workshops for P/CVE

Since its establishment, the IGAD Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (ICEPCVE) has institutionalised annual youth mapping exercises across all IGAD Member States to identify young people actively engaged in peacebuilding, civic advocacy, and community resilience efforts. This systematic mapping which is anchored in the IGAD Regional P/CVE Strategy and the ICEPCVE Programme Document forms the evidence base for designing targeted youth-focused interventions that respond to local contexts, vulnerabilities, and existing strengths.

By identifying youth who are both influential in their communities and positioned to shape narratives around peace, tolerance, and resilience, ICEPCVE ensures that its programming engages credible and impactful young leaders. Drawing on this foundation, the Centre has implemented a range of structured interventions aimed at capacitating, convening, and supporting these youth to strengthen their contributions to preventing and countering violent extremism. A central component of this effort has been the delivery of regional strategic communication workshops informed by the Strategic Communication Manual, through which ICEPCVE works closely with youth to enhance their skills in developing and disseminating effective alternative and counter-narratives.

These workshops are designed to build youth competencies in producing narratives that are both gender-responsive and conflict-sensitive. Guided by the Strategic Communication Manual, they provide comprehensive, hands-on training in video production, audio messaging, digital storytelling, creative writing, graphic design, and contextual narrative analysis. Through this integrated skills-building approach, youth participants acquire the analytical and technical capacity to craft persuasive, context-specific messages that challenge violent extremist narratives. They are further supported to package and disseminate these messages across diverse communication platforms including social media, alternative media, community radio, and mainstream outlets, thereby amplifying youth voices and strengthening community resilience against radicalisation.

Beyond technical training, ICEPCVE's youth programming incorporates regional multistakeholder platforms that bring together youth and a broad coalition of P/CVE actors, including civil society organisations, religious leaders, media practitioners, community influencers, and government representatives. These platforms create opportunities for youth to exchange experiences, analyse emerging and context-specific extremist narratives, and jointly develop messages that challenge the ideological, social, and economic drivers of violent extremism. By positioning youth as equal partners in dialogue, communication strategy development, and peacebuilding processes, these engagements reinforce youth agency and strengthen collaborative approaches to countering violent extremism across the region.

A distinctive feature of ICEPCVE's youth engagement model is its emphasis on gender-responsive and culturally grounded communication. Youth are supported to interrogate the gendered dimensions of violent extremism and to design narratives that reflect the lived experiences of both women and men in their communities. This approach aligns with the Regional P/CVE Strategy and global P/CVE standards, which underscore the importance of inclusive, locally resonant communication in effective prevention efforts.

In recognition of the need to broaden its constituency of young leaders, ICEPCVE has also strategically integrated cohorts of the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) into its communication programmes. The YALI-focused strategic communication workshops have expanded the diversity, innovation, and leadership present within ICEPCVE's youth network. YALI participants, drawn from multiple professional domains including media, civil society, social entrepreneurship, and governance, bring strong digital literacy and leadership skills that enrich workshop outputs. Their involvement has strengthened cross-border collaboration, deepened regional youth networks, and generated fresh approaches to P/CVE communication campaigns grounded in digital influence and evidence-based messaging.

Outputs from these engagements demonstrate strong youth ownership and practical application of skills gained. Youth from Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia, Uganda, and South Sudan, among others, have produced multimedia content that interrogates extremist propaganda, promotes

positive identity formation, and encourages civic engagement. Their narratives ranging from community-based messaging and interfaith dialogue content to culturally grounded audio-visual productions illustrate the power of youth-led communication in shaping community norms and strengthening resilience.

Taken together, these interventions demonstrate ICEPCVE's commitment to cultivating a regional cohort of youth communicators equipped to challenge violent extremist narratives, enhance social cohesion, and promote peaceful coexistence. By integrating skills development, multistakeholder collaboration, regional youth networking, and the engagement of established leadership platforms such as YALI, ICEPCVE has significantly contributed to positioning youth as influential actors in P/CVE communication and as co-creators of a more peaceful IGAD region.

15. Dialogue in Conflict Prevention, Grievance Management, and Trust-Building among Youth in the IGAD region

Guided by the Strategic Communication Manual, the Centre systematically integrates structured dialogue sessions into both its regional and national workshops, creating inclusive spaces where youth from across the IGAD region can engage meaningfully with one another. The Manual emphasises dialogue as a core strategic communication tool for fostering trust, enhancing mutual understanding, and promoting collective problem-solving all which are principles that underpin ICEPCVE's workshop design. Through facilitated discussions, scenario-based exercises, and peer-learning exchanges, youth are encouraged to articulate the challenges affecting their communities, interrogate the drivers of violent extremism, and collaboratively generate context-appropriate solutions. These dialogue platforms not only strengthen youth agency and confidence but also cultivate a culture of shared learning and empathy, enabling participants to refine messages and interventions that resonate authentically within their diverse social contexts.

Guided by the Strategic Communication Manual, the Centre has invested in the development of practical dialogue checklists that equip youth with structured guidance for facilitating dialogue

sessions within their communities. Recognising dialogue as an essential peacebuilding tool and not merely a communication technique, ICEPCVE integrates these tools into national and regional workshops to enable communities to surface grievances, rebuild trust, and co-create solutions to issues that violent extremist groups often exploit.

The checklists, introduced during national workshops, provide step-by-step instructions on designing and conducting effective interreligious, intercultural, and intergenerational dialogue. They outline foundational elements such as stakeholder mapping, the creation of safe and inclusive dialogue spaces, trauma-, gender-, and conflict-sensitive facilitation techniques, and the identification of shared values that can serve as anchors for social cohesion. They further guide youth on navigating sensitive topics including unemployment, marginalisation, displacement, and declining trust in authorities ensuring that discussions move constructively toward collaborative problem-solving.

To strengthen intergenerational collaboration, the tools encourage approaches such as mentorship pairs, storytelling, cultural memory practices, and the establishment of community-based Intergenerational Peace Councils, which provide structured mechanisms for sustaining dialogue beyond workshop settings. The checklists also emphasise accountability and follow-through by guiding youth in developing action plans, integrating quick-win initiatives, engaging local media to amplify peace messaging, and applying monitoring and reflection frameworks to assess the impact of dialogue processes.

Through these practical tools, ICEPCVE not only standardises dialogue practices across IGAD Member States but also builds youth capacity to lead safe, inclusive, and transformative conversations that address the drivers of violent extremism. Ultimately, by equipping young people with structured facilitation guidance, the Centre strengthens their agency as mediators, communicators, and bridge-builders, empowering them to promote community resilience and contribute meaningfully to sustainable peace.

16. Gaps and Opportunities for Strengthening Youth-focused P/CVE Interventions in the IGAD Region

The analysis of ICEPCVE programming, strategic communication initiatives, and regional policy frameworks reveals substantial progress in positioning youth as central actors within P/CVE efforts across the IGAD region. Nevertheless, there are that gaps continue to constrain the full realisation of youth agency, while emerging opportunities offer promising pathways to strengthen youth-focused interventions.

17. Gaps in Current Youth-Focused P/CVE Approaches

Although IGAD's regional frameworks emphasise meaningful youth engagement, most Member States have yet to institutionalise mechanisms that enable young people to participate consistently in the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of national P/CVE strategies. In countries such as Ethiopia, Uganda, and South Sudan, youth involvement in P/CVE processes largely occurs through ad hoc consultations, short-term projects, or donor-driven initiatives rather than through formalised national structures. As a result, youth voices remain underrepresented in key decision-making bodies, and their contributions are not systematically integrated into long-term policy development. This limited institutionalisation of youth participation reduces the sustainability and legitimacy of P/CVE interventions, despite the significant demographic and social influence youth hold across the region.

Despite the enthusiasm, digital familiarity, and community trust that youth bring to P/CVE efforts, their capacity to implement effective strategic communication remains uneven across the IGAD region. Findings from ICEPCVE workshops indicate that many young people struggle with the technical skills required to analyse extremist narratives, craft persuasive counter-messages, and apply conflict-sensitive and gender-responsive communication principles. These challenges are more pronounced in rural and conflict-affected areas, such as parts of Somalia and South Sudan, where access to production equipment, safe content-creation spaces, stable internet, and sustained mentorship is limited. As a result, even motivated youth often face barriers in transforming their knowledge and creativity into

consistent, high-quality strategic communication outputs capable of countering violent extremist messaging at scale.

Although interreligious, intercultural, and intergenerational dialogues facilitated through ICEPCVE's checklists have demonstrated significant value, these efforts often remain weakly connected to broader community governance and peacebuilding structures. In many IGAD Member States, youth facilitators report challenges in sustaining dialogue initiatives beyond the initial workshop setting. These difficulties are driven by limited community ownership, inadequate resources, and the absence of formal mechanisms linking youth-led dialogue processes to existing local peace committees, administrative structures, or early-warning systems. As a result, the transformative potential of these dialogues is constrained, and opportunities to build long-term trust, address entrenched grievances, and institutionalise youth-led peace efforts remain underutilised.

Insufficient psychosocial support remains a significant gap within youth-focused P/CVE interventions across the IGAD region. Young people living in displacement-affected, borderland, or conflict-prone contexts often contend with the effects of trauma, prolonged insecurity, social exclusion, and disrupted family or community structures. Despite these realities, psychosocial support and trauma-sensitive methodologies are not consistently integrated into P/CVE programming. This omission undermines the effectiveness of communication and dialogue initiatives, as unaddressed trauma can impair decision-making, reduce trust in institutions, and heighten vulnerability to manipulation by violent extremist networks. Without embedding psychosocial support into youth engagement efforts, interventions risk failing to reach those most susceptible and may overlook the emotional and psychological dimensions that underpin resilience and long-term behavioural change.

Economic marginalisation continues to be one of the most pressing challenges undermining the resilience of youth across the IGAD region. Even after receiving training in strategic communication, leadership, or dialogue facilitation, many young people face limited employment opportunities, restricted access to capital, and weak connections to livelihood programmes. These realities are particularly acute in fragile border regions and informal urban settlements, where unemployment and underemployment remain persistently high. Violent extremist groups frequently exploit such economic

grievances- offering financial incentives, perceived status, or livelihood promises to attract vulnerable youth. Without integrating economic empowerment components into P/CVE initiatives, capacity-building interventions alone may have limited long-term impact. The lack of sustainable livelihood pathways not only constrains youth agency but also weakens community-wide resilience to radicalisation and recruitment.

Gender disparities continue to limit the full participation of young women in P/CVE initiatives across the IGAD region. Although regional frameworks recognise the importance of gender-responsive approaches, young women remain underrepresented in strategic communication workshops, dialogue facilitation teams, and youth leadership platforms. Cultural norms, safety concerns, unpaid care responsibilities, and limited access to digital resources often restrict their ability to engage in P/CVE activities on equal footing with young men. This exclusion undermines programme effectiveness, as it overlooks the distinct ways in which young women experience and resist violent extremism as well as their unique insights into recruitment patterns, community grievances, and the gendered drivers of radicalisation. When young women are not meaningfully included in designing and delivering P/CVE interventions, the resulting strategies risk being incomplete, less contextually grounded, and less responsive to community needs. Strengthening gender-responsive youth engagement is therefore critical to ensuring that P/CVE efforts are truly inclusive, representative, and capable of addressing the diverse vulnerabilities and contributions of all youth.

18. Opportunities for Strengthening Youth-Focused P/CVE Interventions

The IGAD Regional P/CVE Strategy, the Youth Engagement Strategy, and the Strategic Communication Manual together provide a robust policy and operational framework for advancing youth participation in P/CVE across the region. These frameworks articulate clear roles for youth, emphasise prevention-oriented approaches, and align with global standards on inclusive peacebuilding. Complementing these policies, ICEPCVE's institutional mandate supported by annual youth mapping exercises ensures that youth-focused interventions are grounded in evidence and tailored to country-specific contexts. This

combination of strong regional policy direction and institutional capacity creates a solid foundation upon which Member States and partners can expand and sustain youth engagement in P/CVE.

ICEPCVE's regional workshops underscore the value of bringing together youth, civil society organisations, religious leaders, media practitioners, community elders, and government representatives in shared P/CVE spaces. These multi-stakeholder platforms enhance the legitimacy and credibility of prevention messages while enabling stakeholders to pool expertise and strengthen coordination. Expanding such platforms provides an opportunity to deepen trust between communities and institutions, encourage cross-country learning, and cultivate a shared understanding of the narratives and grievances driving violent extremism. This collaborative model can contribute to more coherent, community-responsive, and sustainable P/CVE interventions across IGAD Member States.

Youth across the IGAD region are increasingly leveraging digital tools such as storytelling platforms, social media campaigns, podcasts, creative arts, and short-form video content to communicate peace and counter extremist narratives. This digital fluency presents a significant opportunity to scale youth-led, online-driven P/CVE messaging that resonates with peers. The integration of Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) cohorts into ICEPCVE programming further strengthens this opportunity, as these youth bring advanced digital literacy, content-creation skills, and leadership experience. Harnessing this growing digital expertise enables the development of innovative, youth-driven communication campaigns capable of reaching large, diverse audiences.

The Practitioner's Checklists developed for Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti offer practical, replicable, and context-specific tools that support youth in facilitating interreligious, intercultural, and intergenerational dialogues. By standardising core facilitation steps including stakeholder mapping, safe space creation, trauma-sensitive engagement, and structured follow-up the checklists enhance the quality and consistency of youth-led dialogue initiatives. Their trauma- and gender-sensitive design ensures that youth are equipped to address complex and sensitive community grievances safely. The availability of these tools presents a major opportunity to scale youth-led dialogue processes across IGAD Member States, strengthening community resilience and institutionalising peaceful problem-solving practices.

The global Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda provides strong normative support for expanding youth participation in peace and security governance. Increasingly, IGAD Member States are recognising young people not as security risks but as essential peace actors, which opens new avenues for institutionalising youth roles in national P/CVE committees, local peace committees, community safety initiatives, and early-warning systems. Alignment with the YPS agenda therefore reinforces ongoing regional efforts and creates policy momentum to integrate youth more systematically into prevention and peacebuilding structures.

ICEPCVE's emphasis on monitoring, reflection, and community-driven "quick-win" initiatives such as peace clubs, mentorship programmes, community clean-ups, and youth forums offers an important opportunity to deepen local ownership of P/CVE activities. These mechanisms allow youth to demonstrate immediate, tangible contributions to community wellbeing, building trust and visibility. They also help cultivate a culture of continuous learning within youth networks, enabling young people to refine their approaches, document successful practices, and adapt interventions in response to emerging challenges. Strengthening these monitoring and learning processes can significantly enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of youth-led P/CVE interventions across the region.

19. Conclusion

Youth engagement has emerged as a central pillar in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) within the IGAD region, reflecting a decisive shift from viewing youth primarily as a vulnerable demographic to recognising them as essential partners in regional peace and security architectures. The IGAD Regional Strategy for P/CVE, the Youth Engagement Strategy, and ICEPCVE's Five-Year Programme Document collectively articulate a coherent vision in which young people are empowered as communicators, facilitators of dialogue, early-warning actors, and agents of community resilience. The evidence drawn from ICEPCVE's strategic communication workshops, annual youth mapping exercises, and the development of structured dialogue checklists demonstrates that institutional efforts

are increasingly directed toward equipping youth with the technical, analytical, and leadership skills necessary to counter the drivers and narratives of violent extremism within their communities.

Across the IGAD Member States, the Centre's interventions underscore the transformative potential of youth when provided with the tools, platforms, and networks needed to meaningfully contribute to P/CVE. Through hands-on training informed by the Strategic Communication Manual, young people have developed sophisticated capacities in counter-narrative design, gender-responsive communication, multimedia production, and digital storytelling, skills that directly address the communicative tactics of violent extremist groups. Furthermore, the integration of structured interreligious, intercultural, and intergenerational dialogue processes, supported by national and regional checklists demonstrates ICEPCVE's commitment to grounding youth-led efforts in inclusive, trauma-sensitive, and culturally resonant practices. These dialogues not only facilitate the airing of grievances and the rebuilding of fractured relationships but also institutionalise youth leadership as a core mechanism in strengthening social cohesion.

Although significant progress has been made, the regional landscape continues to present complex challenges. Structural drivers such as unemployment, marginalisation, mistrust in institutions, and unequal access to opportunity continue to shape youth vulnerability. The uneven institutionalisation of youth participation in national P/CVE frameworks, limited psychosocial support, gender disparities, and restricted economic pathways risk constraining the long-term sustainability of youth-focused initiatives. However, the region also presents substantial opportunities: a vibrant and digitally connected youth population, supportive regional policy frameworks, expanding multi-stakeholder platforms, and emerging tools such as the practitioner checklists that standardise and scale youth-led facilitation and communication efforts.

Taken together, the documents reviewed affirm that youth engagement is both a strategic necessity and a powerful asset in P/CVE across the IGAD region. When appropriately supported, youth demonstrate creativity, resilience, and a strong capacity for leadership in peacebuilding and conflict transformation. Sustained investment in youth skills development, institutional inclusion, livelihood opportunities, and multi-stakeholder collaboration will therefore be essential in consolidating gains and

enhancing the region's resilience to violent extremism. Ultimately, youth are not simply beneficiaries of P/CVE programming but indispensable co-creators of a more peaceful, cohesive, and secure IGAD region.

References

- Heinsohn, G. (2003). *Söhne und Weltmacht: Terror im Aufstieg und Fall der Nationen*. Orell Füssli.
- IGAD Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (ICEPCVE). (2025). *Practitioner's Checklist for Effective Interreligious, Intercultural, and Intergenerational Dialogue for Peacebuilding and Preventing Violent Extremism in Ethiopia*. IGAD/ICEPCVE.
- IGAD Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (ICEPCVE). (2025). *Practitioner's Checklist for Effective Interreligious, Intercultural, and Intergenerational Dialogue for Peacebuilding and Preventing Violent Extremism in Kenya*. IGAD/ICEPCVE
- IGAD Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (ICEPCVE). (2025). *Practitioner's Checklist for Effective Intercultural and Intergenerational Dialogue for Peacebuilding and Countering Violent Extremism in Djibouti*. IGAD/ICEPCVE.
- Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (ICEPCVE). (2021). *Amplifying the Voices of Young African Leaders: YALI Strategic Communication Workshop Report*. ICEPCVE.
- Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (ICEPCVE). (2024). *Report on the Regional Workshop Using Strategic Communications to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism*. ICEPCVE.
- Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (ICEPCVE). (2024). *ICEPCVE Annual Report 2024*. ICEPCVE
- Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). (2016). *The IGAD Regional Strategy for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE)*. IGAD Secretariat.

- Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). (2019). *IGAD Youth Engagement Strategy for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism*. IGAD Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (ICEPCVE).
- Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). (2020). *ICEPCVE Five-Year Programme Document*. IGAD Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (ICEPCVE).
- Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). (2022). *Strategic Communication Manual for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE Messages Manual)*. IGAD Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (ICEPCVE).
- Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). (2023). *IGAD Facts & Figures 2023*. IGAD Secretariat.
- Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). (2023). *IGAD Youth Policy: A Resilient, Peaceful and Prosperous Youth*. IGAD Secretariat.
- Lerner, R. M., Almerigi, J. B., Theokas, C., & Lerner, J. V. (2005). Positive youth development: A view of the issues. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 25(1), 10–16.
- Mukuna, T. E. (2019). *Youth-Inclusive Mechanisms for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in the IGAD Region: A Case Study of Kenya*. Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA). ISBN: 978-99944-75-01-8.
- United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). (2024). *State of World Population Report 2024*. UNFPA.
- United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. (2024). *World Population Prospects 2024*. UN DESA.
- Urdal, H. (2006). A clash of generations? Youth bulges and political violence. *International Studies Quarterly*, 50(3), 607–629.
- Yeboua, K., & Cilliers, J. (2021). *Development Prospects for the Horn of Africa Countries to 2040*. Institute for Security Studies.